

Choosing a Baby Carrier

By Elizabeth Pantley, Author of Gentle Baby Care

Most parents find a baby carrier to be invaluable during the first year of their baby's life. There are many types and styles to choose from. The different types of baby carriers fall into three main categories: slings, front packs and backpacks.

Slings

These are made of fabric and are available in a wide variety of styles. They "sling" sash-style over your shoulder to hold baby in front of you. Slings offer many benefits to both baby and parent. Here are some of the most commonly cited by experienced sling-users:

- A sling is perfect for the newborn months, when Baby needs to be held often in your arms, as opposed to being pushed at arm's length in a stroller.
- A sling is an excellent way to carry your baby around the house because it keeps your baby happy while leaving your two arms free to go about your daily tasks.
- Sling carriers are multi-purpose. You can use them to carry your baby, to create privacy for breastfeeding, and to cover your sleeping baby. Some feature a tail that can double as a blanket or coverup.
- Putting your baby into (and getting him back out of) a sling is a breeze. You can even get a sleeping baby in and out of one of these soft carriers without waking her.
- You can carry your baby in a variety of positions.
- Slings are small, lightweight and easy to transport.
- Slings are wonderful to use when a stroller would be inconvenient, such as up stairs, through large crowds or narrow aisle ways, or over rough terrain — or when you'll be going in and out of the car frequently.
- Slings put your baby at the height of people's faces instead of at their knees.
- You can use a sling right up through toddlerhood, when little legs get tired of walking.

An important note about baby slings: They can be confusing to use at first, and your baby can slide out of the bottom if not positioned correctly. Try to find an experienced sling-user, a how-to video, or a knowledgeable sales clerk to help you master the art of baby slinging. Your local La Leche League leader may be able to offer pointers, too.

Slings are very much worth the effort. I bought a sling when my second baby, Vanessa, was born. I couldn't figure it out, so I left it in the closet. When my third baby, David, was born, I attended a mother-baby class, learned how to use my sling — and was immediately hooked! I used slings extensively with my third and fourth babies and found them to be a marvelous baby care tool.

PARENT TIP

"I put my newborn in the sling so I could sit in bed at night with my toddler and read books. It kept us all together, my hands free and gave reading time to BOTH boys!"

Amy, mother of AJ (4) and Ryder (2)

Front packs

Front pack carriers are similar to slings in use but are more complex in their structure. They have a seat that attaches to the front of you with straps that crisscross behind you; these straps secure the carrier to your body. Here's what you need to know about front packs:

- The benefits of front packs are similar to many of those of slings, such as their light weight and portability, and the fact that you can carry your baby while keeping your arms and hands free.
- Some allow you to choose between carrying your baby facing inward toward you or outward, facing the world – which is often fun for older babies.
- Settling the baby into and out of the carrier require more steps than a sling does.
- Moving a sleeping baby into or out of the carrier is difficult, unless the seat unbuckles separately from the harness.
- Front packs are better suited to a baby who is strong enough to hold his head upright.

Backpacks

A back carrier is similar to a camping backpack. It has a seat for your baby that attaches to your back with a frame and straps that cross over your shoulders. A few things to know about backpacks:

- They're perfect for an older baby who loves to look around and be carried high on your shoulders.
- Many backpacks have pouches for holding supplies.
- Some models have a canopy for inclement weather or sun protection.
- Getting a backpack off (and putting it on) are typically two-person tasks.
- Backpacks are best for an older baby who can sit up well.
- They're great for an all-day trip, such as hiking, shopping or visiting an amusement park

How do you decide which carrier to use?

No single baby carrier is perfect for all parents. Every parent has different needs, preferences and proportions. Many people actually begin with one type of carrier and move on to another when their babies get older.

First, think about how you plan to use a carrier. Will you use it primarily at home, instead of a stroller while away from home, or both? Do you already have a stroller, or must your carrier fill all your baby-carrying needs? Defining its purpose will help you choose which carrier is best for you. Read the package information (or talk to

other parents who own a similar carrier) to learn which purposes it serves best and to determine if it matches your needs.

The very best way to decide? Try carriers on — either at the store or with a friend who owns one. Actually putting your baby in the carrier will give you the best idea as to fit, but if you are shopping without your baby (or don't have your baby yet!) try using a stuffed animal from the toy department.

PARENT TIP

"A baby carrier can help new adoptive parents to decline politely those who want to hold your baby while he still needs exclusive Mommy or Daddy contact. The carrier can be especially helpful in difficult situations such as visits to your child's orphanage or former foster parents."*

—*Laurel, mother of 16-month-old Crystal*

* This is also an excellent idea for parents who blanch at the thought of their tiny newborn being passed around the room from person to person!

Points to consider when purchasing a carrier:

- *Comfort.* Does the carrier feel good to you?
- *Fit for your baby.* Does it seem to suit your baby well?
- *Fit for you.* Does it fit your size and body type? Can you carry the baby without strain?
- *Safety.* Will the baby be secure and well supported?
- *Features.* Does it meet your needs?
- *Usability.* Can you easily get your baby in and out of the carrier? How about putting it on and taking it off? Keep in mind that some models require practice.
- *Construction.* Does the fabric suit your wardrobe, climate and needs (i.e., lightweight for summer, weatherproof for outdoor use)?
- *Care.* Is it machine-washable or easy to wipe clean?
- *Flexibility.* Can you carry your baby in various positions?
- *Adjustability.* Can it be tightened or adjusted to fit you when you are at home in indoor clothing or outside wearing a coat? Can you adjust it easily for use by others?
- *Adaptability.* Will it work for your baby now as well as six months from now?
- *Appearance.* Do you like the style? Will you enjoy wearing it?

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